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The Keeper of the Gate

All over the world students are knocking on university doors. All over the world universities are expanding. In some countries social policy calls for a reasonable balance between facilities and demands; thus efforts are being made to keep building apace with rising student demand. In other countries large numbers must be turned away, for the basic policy has been primarily one of exclusion. This problem is an old one. As long ago as the 5th century, the "professors who kept the gate" of Nalanda University in ancient India posed entrance examinations that excluded eight out of every ten candidates.

But increasingly the policy of exclusion is giving way to the idea of selection, for whether the most immediately pressing problem be one of a great excess of candidates, one of properly steering applicants to the most appropriate institutions, or one of improving the methods of selection, admission officers know that the policies that determine who has access to higher education also determine who can gain entrance to the professions and to many positions of government, industrial, and social leadership. The admissions process is a great filter that, in selecting students, is also in large measure determining the nation's future.

General recognition of this role of university admissions, plus worldwide increases in emphasis on education and numbers of university applicants, has resulted in an international study that is sponsored or supported by UNESCO, the International Association of Universities, the Carnegie Corporation, and the College Entrance Examination Board. Educational statistics routinely supplied by most countries to UNESCO, supplemented by detailed and analytical studies of countries selected to represent widely different regions and conditions, provide the basis for considering such questions as: Who has access to the university? What educational, cultural, economic, and political policies and practices control access to higher education? What measures are most useful in selecting the candidates of greatest ability? Should major decisions concerning eligibility be made early so that the elect can be especially prepared in secondary schools, or later so that a larger number can seek to qualify?

Nations differ so greatly in their educational traditions, in the percentage of an age group enrolled in school, and in their economic and cultural development that each must find its own answers to its own problems. But behind these differences and the differences in the mechanics of university admissions lie the world's educational and social problems. These have enough in common to make of the international study a venture that will help individual nations and educational institutions in considering their own problems and that will be of special value to the developing countries that know they must rely upon massive and rapid educational improvements to achieve their national goals.—D.W.